A STUDY OF ASHOKA MAURYA OF INDIA:
HOW HIS CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM
AFFECTED THE HISTORY OF INDIA

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THESIS: A STUDY OF ASHOKA MAURYA OF INDIA
HOW HIS CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM
AFFECTED THE HISTORY OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Ashoka Maurya ruled as the third emperor of India's Mauryan Dynasty about 263 BCE. After leading his army to battle in order to expand his empire in the northwestern part of India, Ashoka was devastated by the destruction he initiated. He renounced killings and adopted wholeheartedly the Buddhist doctrine of non-violence. Ashoka brought many changes to India with his conversion to Buddhism. This study reflects research from primary and secondary sources related to India's history and shows how Ashoka made changes in India. Of particular interest are the primary source rock and pillar inscriptions Ashoka published after his conversion. The edicts contained his thoughts, Buddhist teachings, and his will for the empire. This study expounds the research regarding (1) the historical background of the Mauryan Dynasty, (2) the causes of Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, (3) how India changed after Ashoka's conversion, and (4) conclusions.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ashoka Maurya was one of the most influential leaders in India's history. The British historian H.G. Wells in his work The Outline of History said of Ashoka, "amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history...the name of Ashoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star" (94). Ashoka's eventual aversion to violence and war, his honesty in admitting his mistakes, and his concern for the welfare of his people not only made him shine as brilliantly as a star, but also dramatically changed the history of India.

Historical documentation of Ashoka has been a work in progress. For over two thousand years, Ashoka was essentially forgotten in history. Then in the nineteenth century, European scholars had a renaissance of Indian literature that provided historians with numerous translations. With this rediscovery, not only was light shed on the philosophies and religions of India, but also on the many legends and biographies. Ashoka's name appeared in several different texts including the *Divyavadana,* a book of Buddhist Sanskrit prose and verse dating to the first century CE. Yet since many legends were simply nothing more than a popular yearning for an exemplary ruler, none of the references were taken too seriously at first. Ashoka was portrayed as too good to be true: the ruthless, cruel leader who saw the light and transformed into the supreme

benevolent ruler. When he was evil, Buddhists legends contended he killed ninety-nine brothers to obtain the throne after his father. As the transformed benevolent king, Buddhist legends claimed he built 84,000 monasteries and almost as many stupas in one day. Scholars did not take this king too seriously.

Renewed interest in this legendary figure came with the discovery of rock and stone pillars containing edicts engraved during the reign of Ashoka. In 1879, Alexander Cunningham published a translation of these inscriptions. Even more engravings were discovered with the latest four found in 1969.

These stone inscriptions provided a rare access to the personalized edicts dictated by Ashoka and thus, were a primary source concerning this king. Gradually, as rock and pillar inscriptions were scrutinized, scholars began to consider Ashoka a legitimate historical figure and to evaluate his place in India's history.

The rock and pillar edicts were critical in understanding and documenting the changes Ashoka brought to India for they were a record in his very own words. Romila Thapar in her work "Asoka and Buddhism as Reflected in the Asokan Edicts" described the benefit of these exclusive inscriptions: "It is rare in Indian history to have access to the personalized edicts of a king...in this we are fortunate" (Thapar 16). Ashoka's edicts, engraved on rocks and stone pillars between 264 and 262 BCE, were scattered throughout India, Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The location of the rock engravings was governed by the accessibility of suitable slabs of stone. The pillars, on the other hand, were

placed in very specific locations. For example, one marked the birthplace of Buddha. Others were found near populated areas to be seen by as many people as possible. The pillar edicts, between forty and fifty feet in height, weighed up to fifty tons. They were all quarried between 247 and 242 BCE in the Chunar Hills along the Ganges River and sometimes transported over one hundred miles to the location where they were erected. The pillars were originally capped with a roaring lion, a bull, or a spirited horse. These stone works reflected the great art and design of the Indian culture. The even greater testimony for historians was the very words of this ruler engraved in stone as a primary source. The history regarding Ashoka was chiefly known from these rock and pillar edicts.

Traditionally Ashoka was not famous for these edicts for many of them were written in the commoners' spoken form of Sanskrit called *Ptakrita,* soon forgotten after Ashoka's time. He was instead known in the Buddhist literature as a cruel ruler who converted to Buddhism, promoted non-violence, and provided goodness to all people in his kingdom.

This research shows the transformation that occurred in the country of India because of Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism. First, this study investigates the three aggressive generations of the Mauryan Dynasty to provide background and to shed light on the caliber of leadership training Ashoka received from his upbringing. One must understanding Ashoka's family history in order to comprehend the difference he made after his conversion.

Secondly, this research covers the causes of Ashoka's conversion, which builds an understanding of the personal and political benefits for him. His remorse and shame after a bloody battle, which he instigated and took responsibility for, were the catalyst to his conversion. The twenty-first century is filled with news stories of country leaders rationalizing their mistakes by blaming someone else. How rare to find (if one even can) honest leaders who willingly take the blame for their own blunders or misjudgments. Ashoka Maurya of the fourth century BCE was such an individual. The humanity in his public remorse and the concern that his people in India were treated morally are quite moving.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this research looks at how this one leader made such a cataclysmic change within his empire. India transformed in its domestic and foreign policies as Ashoka transformed into a benevolent ruler. The degree of his service was indicated on a rock edict in northern India which states: "All men are my children. Just as I desire that my children will fare well and be happy in this world…I desire the same for all men" (Kalinga Rock Edict 1). Ashoka's concerned attitude changed the history of India.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, as stated previously, this research looks historically at the Mauryan Dynasty, what caused Ashoka's conversion, and how this change in his life eventually affected the history of India. The second purpose for this historical study is a bit subtler: to build hope for the possibility of change. By looking at a few moments in history, the

relatively short span of time during Ashoka's reign, one cannot but have hope. If Ashoka changed, why could not another leader rise up with the same honesty and desire to help humanity? Ashoka raised the bar. He was by no means perfect, and openly admitted his weakness, which in itself is refreshing to see in a leader. Howard Zinn in his book Politics of History, explains the benefit of looking into historical events:

> History cannot provide confirmation that something better is inevitable; but it can uncover evidence that it is conceivable. It can point to moments when human beings cooperated with one another...when governments were capable of a bit of genuine concern…it can disclose men and women acting as heroes rather than culprits or fools…even if the actual change is so small as to leave us still desperate today, we need, to spur us on, the faith that change is possible. (48)

The significance of this study on Ashoka Maurya in regards to the humanities is convincing. Dr. Donald Lewis, a professor of philosophy at California State University, Dominguez Hills, states in his course guide for Humanities 505: "From a humanistic point of view, the prime function of all knowledge should be the improvement of the conditions of human existence, a pacification of the environment, and a liberation of human potentiality" (9). This study provides an understanding of Ashoka's life and fulfills Dr. Lewis' three functions of knowledge in humanities. First of all, Ashoka dedicated his service

as king to improve the quality of life for all his people in India. Next, he was a pacifist who explained to neighboring tribes that they did not need to fear him: he would not attack. Finally, in line with Lewis' statement, Ashoka was a sterling example of the potential of a selfless leader, dedicated to providing goodness to all the people of India. An acquaintance with Ashoka provides enlightenment and inspiration to anyone involved in the field of humanities.

The limitation to this study deals mainly with perspectives. The primary source of rock and pillar edicts was written from Ashoka's viewpoint. To be able to read the very words of the man researched is quite advantageous. On the other hand, the primary source is limited to his point of view and the image he wanted to preserve. There are no historical records from the common people who lived under Ashoka's reign to hear their opinions concerning the changes he made in India.

Another limitation to the study is that Buddhists wrote many of the later historical records concerning Ashoka. Since Ashoka is the proverbial poster child for Buddhism (bad individual made good by the teachings of Buddha), there is a concern about the degree of propaganda. Do the records and legends of Ashoka contain exaggerations in order to promote the religion?

To work around these limitations, this research clearly identifies the source. Several perspectives are discussed. First this paper states Ashoka's words and then projects what the common man or the Brahman priest might have thought. The Buddhist sources are identified for what they are: the

Buddhist perspective. Often different Buddhist texts are compared to each other in order to sort out facts. Because the Buddhist monks kept records and timetables, these sources are quite valuable. The same can be said for Ashoka's edicts, as they provide a chronological framework for the events of his reign.

Critical to this study is the definition of *dharma*, a concept used in both Hinduism and Buddhism. *Dharma* was derived from the root word *dhri,* meaning that which holds or sustains. It first appeared in the Hindu Vedas and referred to the cosmic or world order that was held together by the all-powerful, unchanging laws of nature. Over time, *dharm*a evolved to mean moral laws, duties or what was right. As the cosmos upheld principles of nature to keep functioning, so man must sustain moral standards and do what was right. *Dharma* then gradually developed into a code of behavior and moral conduct. According to Hinduism and Buddhism, everyone had a different path to follow, and therefore, the duties or *dharma* varied depending on one's role in life.

Hinduism and Buddhism both used the term *dharma,* but with different nuances. Since Hinduism upheld the caste system, one's duties or *dharma* were appropriate within one's particular caste position. Yet Buddhism taught that one existed as a part of a whole, not as self in separate castes. The Buddha did not discriminate against lower castes or women, but taught love for all. Buddhism taught that meditation should center on *dharma* and one's need to be a carrier of goodness. No doubt Ashoka embraced the concept of goodness to all

regardless of one's caste, for his edicts proclaimed morality, respect and goodness for servants as well as masters (Rock Pillar 10). Under Ashoka's Hindu training, a show of force was part of the *dharma* or duty of a king. With his conversion to Buddhism, Ashoka rejected force and adopted the Buddha's message of non-violence as his *dharma* or kingly duty.

The definition of the term *dharma,* when used in this research, refers to the meaning Ashoka attached to it. He conveyed through the rock and pillar inscriptions his own interpretation of *dharma*:

> There is no gift like the *dharma*. It consists of this: proper behavior towards servants and employees, respect for mother and father, generosity to friends, companions, relations, Brahmins and ascetics, and not killing living beings. One benefits in this world and gains great merit in the next by giving the gift of the *dharma*. (Rock Pillar 12)

Another clarification of terms is needed regarding the spelling of Ashoka's name. Three variations of this ruler's name appear in writings: Asoka, Asoka, and Ashoka. The differences result from the variation in methods of transliteration. The latter spelling is used throughout this work. When citing a work that included a different spelling, the author's choice is used.

Many historians secularize and transform date abbreviations. AD (*anno Domini* or the year of our Lord) becomes CE, meaning during the common era; BC (before Christ) becomes BCE, meaning before the common

era. In this work, the abbreviation CE and BCE are used. When citing a work, the author's choice is used.

Scholars and translators have labeled and numbered the rock and pillar edicts inscribed by Ashoka. Most of the rock edicts were catalogued simply by the abbreviation RE with a number. For example, the fourteenth rock edict was labeled RE 14. The pillar edicts were handled the same way only using PE as the abbreviation. Sometimes the edicts listed the location in front of the abbreviation, as with Kalinga RE 1. This study uses these abbreviations within the text.

A review of the literature for this research includes a history of the Mauryan Dynasty. Excerpts from Greek historians who lived in India are recorded by the work of R. C. Majumdar (1960) and provide insightful background. Gokhale (1966) provides an excellent overview of the Mauryan Dynasty. Sarkar (2004) provides an analysis of the economic philosophy during the genesis of the dynasty.

Literature that builds an understanding of Ashoka Maurya's choice to convert to Buddhism is critical to the thesis. Dhammika's (1994) and Aiyangar (1994) provide translations of the Ashokan edicts. The history of Buddhism at the time of Ashoka is documented in the work by Coomaraswamy (1964). Gach (2002) helps with the understanding of Buddhist doctrine and supplies a chronological history of religion that matches the time of Ashoka. Information regarding Hinduism, an important religious system at the time, is provided by

Bhaskarananda (2002). Buddhist myths regarding the conversion of Ashoka are discussed by Strong (1983), Thapar (1994), and Guruge (1994). Gokhale (1966) sheds light on an overview of the religious and social history of India during Ashoka's reign.

The changes in India after Ashoka's conversion are best seen in his own words within the translations of the edicts by Dhammika (1994). The humanities' perspective is provided by an essay from Lewis (1997). Zinn (1970) shows the importance of looking back at history to build hope for change. Wells (1922) places the importance of Ashoka in perspective with other great leaders. Vogel (1936) records how art is impacted by this conversion. Finally, Kandel's (1982) work gives a very scientific approach to how people make changes.

The methodology for this thesis places the highest emphasis on the translations of rock and pillar edicts found throughout the Indian subcontinent. These inscriptions are a primary source: Ashoka's own words. From numerous readings of these edicts, evolves this research query: how much did India change after Ashoka's conversion? The various edicts contain Ashoka's interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, his personal changes, or India's policy changes. Not every edict is documented in this paper for there is not room or need to do that. The edicts of primary impact on India are discussed.

Other sources that document the transitions in India during Ashoka's reign are researched. Excerpts from Megathenes, a Greek historian living in India at the time of the Mauryan Dynasty are reviewed in Gokhale's (1966) work.

Gokhale (1966) includes citations from Arthastastra, a book on government and economics written during the Mauryan Dynasty. This book is critical in understanding the impact of the changes Ashoka makes. Printed sources in the literature review are used to develop the thesis.

The methodology also includes a humanities' approach to the topic. Ashoka was human; he made choices according to his beliefs and emotions. Looking at his family upbringing and the people in his life who influenced his decisions is critical to this study. Not only did he communicate the policies for India on the edicts, but he expressed his feelings, too. The rock and pillar inscriptions are the most critical primary source providing insight on how Ashoka's conversion changed the history of India.

CHAPTER 2

HOW ASHOKA MAURYA'S CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM AFFECTED THE HISTORY OF INDIA

Ashoka Maurya was the third ruler of the Mauryan Dynasty about 263 BCE. After a bloody battle in Kalinga, he renounced brutality and endeavored to rule his empire rule according to the Buddhist doctrine of non-violence. His grandfather and father did not follow Buddhism. To understand the full impact of Ashoka's conversion and how it affected the history of India, one must first look at the background of the two generations that preceded him. To what extent did his grandfather and father in contrast to Ashoka handle the Mauryan Dynasty differently? Chandragupta, Ashoka's grandfather, was the founder of the Mauryan Dynasty about 325 BCE. After Ashoka's father, Bindusara, ruled for approximately twenty-five years, he handed the empire over to Ashoka.

The people and events of the times molded the Mauryan Dynasty. In Chandragupta's life, the first event occurred about 327 BCE with his serendipitous meeting of an astute and calculating Brahmin named Kautalya. Kautalya was seeking revenge on a tribal king who had publicly humiliated him. Kautalya felt that Chandragupta had the potential to be the vehicle for fulfilling his desire for retribution. Eventually Chandragupta, with Kautalya's encouragement and training, overthrew this tribal king. As Chandragupta

continued to build his empire with a forceful, mighty army, Kautalya designed the policy of the government. Together they created the first unified state in Indian history.

Kautalya's teachings and political theories were recorded in his book, Arthashastra. Balkrishna Gokhale in his book, Ashoka Maurya, explains: "The science of government according to Kautalya, is concerned with the problem of power or force, the coercive force of state. The king must adequately understand the nature of power and use that power in a balanced way" (37). The balance Kautalya taught involved exercising power, and also practicing goodness to all the people of India. Yet, Kautalya felt a stern hand was needed in government. The laws of the Mauryan Dynasty were harsh with the death penalty enforced. Kautalya believed that punishment given when it was deserved, built respect. Respect caused people to be devoted and later productive in the kingdom. Not only was Kautalya the catalyst at the conception of this dynasty as he trained Chandragupta, but his influence was felt for three generations. His teachings were presented to Chandragupta son, Bindusara. Although Kautalya was not alive at the time of Ashoka, his philosophy regarding the duties of a monarch was passed on to Ashoka in the form of his writings.

Another important event in the molding of this first generation of the Mauryan Dynasty was the presence of the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great, in India about 327 BCE. The Greeks thought of India as "a land of fabulous wealth and innumerable people, of mysterious rivers and bizarre

animals, a land that lay farthest east of the inhabited world" (Gokhale 23). During Alexander's conquests through India, he encountered a young Chandragupta. Their meeting was not pleasant, and although Alexander ordered Chandragupta to be killed, the youth escaped. Ironically, years later Chandragupta took advantage of Alexander's conquests in India.

Northwestern India, in the fourth century BCE, consisted of independent tribes ineffective in uniting against outside resistance. Alexander conquered one tribe after another like a tornado ripping through the country. Yet after he returned to Greece, the leaders he left in place were soon murdered or overthrown. There was not enough support to sustain Alexander's conquests. The significance of the Greek invasions and aftermath for India was that "Alexander had shattered the power of numerous petty kingdoms…and created a military turbulence and a political weakness that were soon exploited by Chandragupta Maurya" (Gokhale 25). The young, strong, and ruthless Chandragupta, an opportunist with Kautalya's encouragement, took advantage of this time to seize power.

About 325 BCE, Chandragupta with a trained army marched north and overthrew the remaining Greek strongholds. His armies, which included thousands of war elephants, struck fear in the hearts of his adversaries as he continued to overthrow tribes along the Ganges River. Turning west, he advanced into the Indus River Valley. Only a few years later, his empire covered

most of northern and central India. It took several years for him to establish his authority over the northwestern part of India, but he eventually commanded a vast empire.

Under Chandragupta, the empire enjoyed great success. Much of the wealth came from widespread foreign trade with Greece, Rome, and China. The affluence was not gained for him, but he used the wealth to improve his empire, including irrigation systems and new roads. His example of investing in the empire would later be seen with Ashoka. Megasthenes, a Greek historian living in India at the time, recorded his personal observations concerning the Mauryan rule in Indika. Gokhale quoted excerpts from Indika:

> The inhabitants having abundant means of subsistence, exceed in consequence the ordinary stature, and are distinguished by their proud bearing. They are found to be well-skilled in the arts, as might be expected of people who inhale a pure air and drink the very finest water...the soil bears on its surface all kinds of fruits...also numerous veins of all sorts of metals...which are employed in making other articles of use and ornament. (23)

Kautalya's teachings regarding the prosperity of the people were realized with Chandragupta, who had ruled for twenty-four years. He passed away about 300 BCE leaving his empire in the hands of his only son, Bindusara, also know as "Slayer of Foes" (Gokhale 18).

Much of what was recorded about Bindusara was recorded in legends. One legend contended that he had many wives and sons. Gokhale explains: "we have a number of legends that may have, at their core, a modicum of historical facts…that Bindusara has as many as sixteen wives and one hundred and one sons, which is quite remarkable even for that notoriously polygamous age!" (Gokhale 35). The Sanskrit Buddhist text, Divyavadana, claimed there was a charming young masseuse whom Bindusara married. From this union about 292 BCE came Ashoka.

Bindusara had considerable administrative experience for he had been appointed governor of the southern territory under his father. Learning from his father, Bindusara trained his sons (three are known by name) in Kautalya's teachings and assigned them positions in distant provinces. This helped Bindusara keep control of the empire. He maintained a friendly relationship with the Greek world and allowed a Greek historian, Daimachus, in his court to keep historical records. One amusing chronicle tells how Bindusara requested sweet wine, figs, and a philosopher from a Greek trading post in Egypt. The reply was rejected on the grounds that philosophers were not for sale.

Bindusara extended the Mauryan Empire and conquered the land between the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea. At the time of Bindusara's death, about 273 BCE, almost the entire Indian subcontinent was part of the Mauryan Dynasty. The only troublesome territory was Kalinga on the eastern coast. His

son, Ashoka, would eventually obtain this area by brutal force and regret this action for the rest of his life. Ashoka was next in line to rule the flourishing Mauryan Dynasty.

During the first years of Ashoka's rule, he was as warlike as his grandfather conquering tribes in the east and earning the name "one without sorrow." The province of Kalinga, a rich and fertile land outside Ashoka's empire, remained independent and was particularly troublesome to him. Ashoka determined that the future of his empire was threatened, if he did not control Kalinga. Another motive for wanting control of this province was that valuable trade routes passed through it. About 261 BCE in the eighth year of his reign, Ashoka marched towards Kalinga. Ashoka himself went as the head of the forces.

The Kalinga people resisted and fought bravely, but were not able to defy Ashoka's army. Rock Edict Thirteen records in Ashoka's own words the devastation of this battle: "one hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died." As far as the eye could see, there were corpses of elephants, horses, and soldiers. There were streams of blood and wounded soldiers writhing in pain on the ground. Widows and fatherless children were crying. Ashoka saw all of this firsthand.

Most champions after a battle celebrated, but this victory did not bring joy to Ashoka. He was filled with grief and remorse. This battle was a turning point

for the mighty ruler. A rock inscription states: "Devanampriya [Ashoka], the conqueror of the Kalingas, is remorseful now, for this conquest is no conquest, since there was killing, death, and banishment of the people...all this with profound sorrow and regret" (RE 13).

King Ashoka's reaction to the battle was unique. "Never before in the history of humanity, nor afterwards, has a king publicly expressed genuine grief for a deed commonly regarded as the legitimate business of kings. The war of Kalinga was the first and last war waged by Ashoka" (Gokhale 59). History did not record exactly when Ashoka converted to Buddhism, but his own words in stone certainly recorded the impact this battle had on his moving towards the non-violent doctrine of Buddhism.

Some historians believed that Ashoka had already converted before the battle at Kalinga. Scholars felt his commitment to the non-violent doctrine of Buddhism simply grew after he witnesses the destruction (Guruge 52). Using the dates of K. V. Rangaswami found in Krishna Aiyangar's work titled <u>Edicts of Ashoka</u>, Ashoka was crowned as king and joined the Buddhists as a laymen the same year, 269 BCE (145). The battle at Kalinga was fought three years later. Rock inscriptions found in three different sites (Rupnath, Brahmagiri and Yerragudi) said: "I did not progress well for a year." Scholars, who think he already was converted at the battle, felt the inscriptions indicated he did not understand the significance of what he had studied regarding the Buddhist concept of non-violence until after the battle. It was easy to imagine Ashoka's

confusion concerning non-violence. His upbringing, under the teachings of Kautalya, taught that military conquest was part of the traditional duty of an Indian monarch. Regardless of what he felt before the battle, afterwards, Ashoka was remorseful.

Another important piece to understanding why Ashoka chose Buddhism was his upbringing. His early education under Hindu beliefs paralleled particular Buddhist doctrine, including the importance of one's *dharma,* or moral duty. Ashoka was raised under the teachings Kautalya, a Brahmin and a contemporary of Aristotle. Kautalya's ideologies regarding a king's responsibilities were recorded in his book, Arthashastra, literally meaning principles of wealth. The writings expanded beyond wealth to a pragmatic philosophy regarding all the responsibilities of statehood: taxation, administration, law, diplomacy, trade, labor, and land occupancy. Kautalya was a realist and a radical for his time, as he felt that the intention of statehood should be to benefit the people, not just the king. The ultimate objective outlined in Arthashastra was to keep the people content. A powerful wealthy monarch was in a position to keep people satisfied and also protect them from invasions of other kings.

The Arthashastra explained that a king had two objectives: "one of which was the exercise of power, and the other the practice of benevolence" (Gokhale 39). This balance was ingrained in the Mauryan rulers as all three were raised under Kautalya's principles of statehood. Kautalya taught that

power "could be legitimate only if used in pursuit of the *dharma*" (Gokhale 38). *Dharma* was a central concept in both Hinduism and Buddhism. Ashoka embraced the doctrine of *dharma* before his conversion for this belief was part of Kautalya's training. Buddhism was appealing to this king because he was comfortable with *dharma*. The Mauryan king eventually rejected the Brahmin's teaching regarding the necessary show of force, and became infamous for proclaiming *dharma* in every area of government.

Who was personally responsible for Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism? The rock and pillar inscriptions did not give one-person credit. History recorded a few personal encounters Ashoka had with Buddhists: his nephew, a monk in northern India and his first wife. These experiences were a positive influence in his choice of Buddhism.

Ashoka throughout his whole life, before and after conversion, was tolerant and respectful of all religions. Not only did he permit all faiths to worship freely, he often invited them to the palace for their advice. <u>Mahavamsa</u>, a Sri Lankan Buddhist text from the fifth century CE, told the tale of how dissatisfied Ashoka was after a session with Brahmins and holy men of other sects regarding the distribution of charity moneys (Gokhale 61). He stood by the palace window and noticed a young man, Nigrodha. It turned out that Nigrodha was his nephew, the son of Ashoka's elder brother, who had been killed in a struggle for the throne after Bindusara. Given audience with the king, his

nephew preached a sermon; Ashoka heard Buddhist doctrine from a family relation.

The Sanskrit Buddhist text, Divyavadana gave a monk, Upagupta, the credit for Ashoka's conversion. A whole sequence of Buddhist stories concerning Ashoka, the proverbial poster child for this religion, was quite contradictory making it hard to give them much credence. Buddhist texts tended to glorify Ashoka's conversion (understandably so for he was great advertisement). Regardless, one can imagine that a personal encounter with a very convincing monk made an impression on Ashoka.

The most historically documented encounter Ashoka had with Buddhism was with Devi, his first wife. At approximately age eighteen, Ashoka was given the responsibility to govern Avanti, a province in central India. Here tribal villages were often rebelling against their incorporation into the Mauryan Dynasty. Avanti was vital to the Mauryan Empire for its agriculture (wheat in particular), its trade, and its commerce (Gokhale 39). This province was a center for Buddhism with two major monasteries located near important trade routes that connected southern and western cities.

In Avanti, Ashoka met and married his first wife, Devi. She came from a merchant family, and she was a devout Buddhist. They had a son, Mahendra and a daughter, Samghamitra. Devi must have raised her children in the Buddhist faith because her son, at age twenty-five, was ordained a monk and her

daughter, at age eighteen, became a nun. Both became famous in the history of Buddhism and were credited for founding an order of Buddhism in Ceylon.

Ashoka, as the husband of a Buddhist and a governor of a province with Buddhist monasteries, was favorably exposed to Buddhism. After the battle at Kalinga, when he was remorseful and shameful, a logical place for him to turn for help was to Buddhism due to his personal experiences. Devi "introduces a very private element into his association with Buddhism" (Thapar 17), an association he would later embrace.

The deeply entwined political and religious climate during Ashoka's lifetime was an important clue in understanding his choice of Buddhism. Hinduism, the major religion at the time of Ashoka, began between 2000 BCE and 1500 BCE with the entrance of the Aryans, nomadic herders from central Asia. About 1000 BCE, in northern India, a form of Hinduism developed that was quite ritualistic, contained many animal sacrifices, and gave the priests (Brahmins) extravagant social privileges. The masses of the people did not find relevance in the rituals and were discontented with the economic waste of the great number of animals used for sacrifice (Gokhale 21). During the fifth century BCE, Siddhartha Guatama, the Buddha, revolted against various aspects of these prevailing religious practices. Buddha preached an equality of spiritual opportunities regardless of one's caste, minimized the importance of heredity, challenged the Brahmin priesthood's rituals, and emphasized non-violent ways with reverence for all living creatures. Obviously, this doctrine would appeal to

the common person. As Gary Gach in his book, Understanding Buddhism explains: "Siddhartha was casting aside inherited ideas, as well as inherited privilege" (9). Even during the Buddha's lifetime, his teachings spread across northern India. After his passing, monasteries sprang up in northern and western India.

By the third century BCE, Buddhism (still considered a sect) was emerging as an adversary to many Hindu social values, in particular the priestly hierarchy. History would later show that it was Ashoka's attention to Buddhism that was the catalyst for its growth into a major religion in India. Ashoka was raised in the Hindu tradition, yet now traditional values were in question. Certainly, he had to consider and question his Brahmin upbringing with Buddhist rebels all around him. Ashoka was very careful to make sure that the Brahmins were always treated with respect, as with holy men of any religion. Rock Edict Four declared, "improper behavior for Brahmins has increased." Ashoka desired that good works towards all replace this disrespect.

Economically, Buddhism was advantageous to Ashoka, also. Partially due to the Buddhist influence, the Indian social hierarchy started to see a transfer in power. Buddha's teachings encouraged the people to reevaluate the Brahmin traditions, including the need for priests. The authority of the Brahmins was slowly shifting away to favor the merchant class. Prior to the Mauryan Dynasty and certainly during it, India was enjoying strong economical advantages. The development of trade and commerce was partially due to the

growth of several trade routes crisscrossing northern, central, and western India. Caravans carried exotic merchandise indicated that this new merchant class in India was increasing in importance and power. The merchants were organized. Guilds carried quite a bit of power as they formed mercenary soldier to protect their property, gave loans, and accepted responsibility for maintaining public works. For the continued prosperity of his kingdom, Ashoka needed to support this growing class of merchants. His choice of Buddhism permitted his country's wealth to flourish.

Many factors contributed to Ashoka's conversion and choice of Buddhism. Eric Kandel, a psychologist at Columbia University, in his article "Molecular Biology of Learning: Modulation of Transmitted Release" explained how the human mind makes choices and learns: "basic forms of learning, [and] habituation...select among a large repertory of pre-existing connections" in the brain (433). Ashoka had many emotional, pre-existing connections to move him in the direction of a non-violent philosophy. The battle at Kalinga produced a deep-rooted emotional response as he declared in a rock edict that he was filled with remorse, sorrow and regret. His personal encounters with a nephew, a monk, and, most importantly, a woman he loved, Devi, all contributed to favorably looking towards Buddhism. As the ruler of the Mauryan Dynasty, he wanted to provide the best for his people, and politically, Buddhism was becoming more popular than the ritualistic Brahmin ways. With many

encounters with this rising religion, it was not surprising to see the third ruler of the Mauryan Dynasty embrace Buddhism.

Ashoka Maurya transformed himself and his state before the very eyes of his people. He changed from a ruler trained in the Indian tradition of military conquest to a benevolent monarch. His desire for his people was inscribed in stone: "All men are my people…I desire that they be provided with complete welfare and happiness in this world" (Kalinga RE 1). India for him was now a large family over whom he presided with the Buddhism as his guide.

The concept of *dharma* was not solitary to Buddhism alone. Hindus, Jains and other popular sects at that time included a code of ethics. *Dharma* was part of the currency of ethical norms propounded by various teachers (Thapar 32). What made Ashoka unique was that as the most powerful man on the Indian subcontinent, he adopted a policy of goodness to all (previous enemies included) and non-violence in domestic and foreign affairs.

Ashoka's princely upbringing under the Brahmin teachings of Kautalya taught that a monarch must balance benevolence, with *danda,* a show of force. Ashoka eventually rejected any show of force. "Asoka's approach to statecraft was based on the primacy of *dharma* over *danda* [show of force]" (Gokhale 90). Even in dealing with his enemies, Ashoka chose goodness as he explains in a rock edict: "Now it is conquest by *dharma* that Beloved of the Gods [Ashoka] considers to be the best conquest and it is *dharma* that has been won here on the borders" (RE13).

The philosophy of Ashoka was based on the belief that human nature was basically good; trust was won through gentle persuasion, not coercion (Gokhale 91). The traditional Buddhist view explained that a monarch conquered the world through the power of *dharma*, not force. Edward D'cruz in India: The Quest for Nationhood, explained that Ashoka interpreted the *dharma*: "as a symbol of a new imperial unity and a cementing force to weld the diverse and heterogeneous elements of his empire" with "a practice of social behavior so broad and benevolent in its scope that no person, no matter what his religion, could reasonable object to it" (47). Goodness was the flag of India during Ashoka's reign in the Mauryan dynasty.

Changes in India first began within the palace walls in the northern city of Pataliputra. According to the Greek historian Megasthenes, this city, on the Ganges River, was surrounded by a moat two hundred yards wide on which small boats could pass. The moat also contained city sewage. A timber barricade surrounded the city with sixty-four gates and over five hundred towers for protection from invaders. The city was built mostly of wood. In the center was the ornate palace set in a park with fountains and fishponds (Gokhale 18). Here Ashoka began making changes.

The central focus of palace life with Ashoka was *dharma*. This goodness included the animals. The royal hunts that his grandfather highly encouraged, were no longer tolerated. He converted hunting trips into pilgrimages as he found visiting holy men of all sects more noble than stalking animals in the

forest. In his own words he stated: "In the past kings used to go out on pleasure tours during which there was hunting and other entertainment...but ten years after his coronation, Beloved of Gods [Ashoka] …instituted *dharma* tours" (RE 8). These tours replaced the hunt with a spiritual quest to visit holy men.

Animal sacrifice among Brahmin priests was considered an "instrument of communion with the gods" (Gokhale 64). Although Ashoka encouraged respect of all religions, he forbade animals to be killed for festivals and religious sacrifice. Ashoka clarified his thoughts in a rock edict:

> No living animals are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice…formerly in the kitchen hundreds of thousands of animals were killed daily for curries. But now with the…dharma edict, only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer are killed…in time, not even these. (RE 1)

Ashoka did not give up eating animal curries altogether at this time, but he greatly reduced the number of animals eaten. He promoted "restraint in killing and harming living beings" (RE 4). Showing this restraint was a change in the palace.

The king's activities in the palace transformed after his conversion. According to his training from Kautalya's teachings in <u>Arthashastra</u>, the king's day was divided into sixteen equal parts (Gokhale 25). The king rose very early to the sound of music. He performed his religious duty assisted by the priest, then conferenced with the kitchen, the astronomers, and the physicians. From

6:00 to 9:00 A.M. he received reports on the financial and military matters. Time was then spent in the bath, at the dining table and studying religious texts. More time was given to consulting with ministers and reports. Then the king rested in the afternoon. After that, he reviewed reports from secret agents and army officers. After the evening meal, he was entertained with music and dancing until bedtime. Most of the time on his daily schedule was spent within the palace walls.

After his conversion, Ashoka changed the emphasis of the rigorous schedule:

> In the past, state business was not transacted nor were reports delivered to the king at all hours. But now I have given this order, that at any time, whether I am eating, in women's quarters, the bed chamber, the chariot, in the park or wherever, reporters are…to report to me the affairs of the people so that I may attend to these affairs wherever I am…truly I consider the welfare of all to be my duty. (RE 6)

According to these inscriptions, Ashoka desired to know what was going on with his people to the same degree that a father would want to know about his own children. This was not the strategy of a leader hoping to win re-election in four years. This was a man who was committed to serve for life and who wanted to be available to help his people.

Ashoka now believed for an empire to be great, it must rest on the foundation of morality, not force:

> His concept of morality was a comprehensive one, as it touched upon not only the simple administrative actions and performances designed to increase the physical happiness of his subjects, but also aimed at the growth of a moral consciousness among them. (Gokhale 92)

In order to do this, in the thirteenth year of his reign, he commissioned *dharma mahamatra*, morality officers. Ashoka explains their responsibilities:

> Now they [morality officers] work among all religions for the establishment of *dharma*, for the promotion of *dharma*, and for the welfare and happiness of all who are devoted to *dharma*. They work among soldiers, chiefs, Brahmins, householders, the poor, the aged and those devoted to the *dharma* for their welfare and happiness...so they may be free of harassment. (RE 5)

He commissioned men to go out into all parts of his empire and spread goodness to all. They were to disburse charity gifts to the vulnerable sections of society: the aged, children, women, and the sick. Ashoka wanted royal charity evenly distributed. The morality officers traveled throughout the empire to ensure that other officials performed their duties fairly. Some officers critiqued judicial administration and taxation operations. Finally, they were expected to

supervise morality in Indian families, not only the common people, but also the royal relatives. They reported directly back to Ashoka.

These morality officers were in every corner of India with quite an assortment of responsibilities ranging from understanding the law to placing judgment on one's morality. One perspective concerning the duties of the morality officers was that they were part of Ashoka's fervor to spread goodness and morality to all of India. Yet "it was more than possible that the zeal created new opportunities of bureaucratic interference in the most intimate aspects of family life" (Gokhale 101). John Strong in his article "Images of Ashoka: Some Indian and Sri Lankan Legends and Their Development" made reference to a view of Ashoka and his morality officers as "a totalitarian Big Brother, a maker of monastic landlordship" (173). Before Ashoka, the state was run with a tightly regulated economy under Kautalya's teachings. Sam Sarkar in his article, "Kautalyan Economics: An Analysis and Interpretation" explained: "Kautalya outlined meticulous detail of the techniques of controlling practically every aspect of economic activity…regulating agriculture, domestic business, as well as foreign trade" (6). Kautalya's plan for India included newly created villages with set distances between each village and a limited number of people. Evidence of Kautalyan control existed especially with Chandragupta, and Bindusara. To add even more regulation of family life and morals with Ashoka's inquisitive *dharma mahamatras*, most likely produced some resentment among the people of India.

An area of concern for Ashoka was religious tolerance. Morality officers were to see that every sect lived without harassment (RE 10). Ashoka decrees: "the sects of all people deserve reverence" (RE 13). Another edict declares: "King Ashoka does reverence to men of all sects, whether ascetics or householders by gifts and various forms of reverence" (RE 10). Yet he did not believe in "ceremonies that are useless and empty", but preferred the "ceremony of morality" (RE 9). This was certainly a shift from the court teachings of Kautalya who encouraged ceremonies to appease and win over spirits (Gokhale 42) including animal sacrifice.

The emperor wanted all people to have the freedom to worship as they chose. Not one rock or pillar inscription called for the people of India to follow the king's choice of religion. Instead Ashoka called for a quality of life his people. This ideology made him a monarch of rare quality. He was not concerned with only mundane politics, but quality of life, including religious tolerance for all.

Ashoka's mentor (Kautalya) looked at religious choice very differently. Kautalya had concerns about the effects the Indian ascetics had on the economy; they practiced self-denial as part of their religious discipline. He felt this was an interruption in the productivity within the empire. Ashoka reached a very different conclusion believing this ascetic influence would be beneficial for maintaining peace and raising the moral climate of the people. Ashoka explained in a rock edict: "[Ashoka] honors both ascetics and the householders

of all religions…it is better to honor other religions…by doing so, one's own religion benefits…one should listen and respect the doctrine professed by others" (RE 12).

Such a tolerant sentiment was remarkable, especially considering times when "we remember the wars fought and the bloodshed caused in the name of religion in Asia and the West" (Gokhale 116). Ashoka diverged from his training by Kautalya. Ashoka's rock edicts were the Magna Carta on religious tolerance and were significant as a most enlightened statement on goodwill towards all religions.

The morality officers were also sent on diplomatic missions to neighboring territories to preach. Most likely the preaching was disagreeable to some of the bordering tribes, but it certainly was a change from the previous generations of the Mauryan Dynasty where there was a threat of being killed or conquered. Ashoka wanted these tribes to feel a sense of peace and safety for their lives were not at risk: "now it is conquest by *dharma* that Beloved of the Gods [Ashoka] considers to be the best conquest, and it has been won here on the borders" (RE 13). In another edict, he explained that "the people of the unconquered territories beyond the borders might think: "What is the king's intentions towards us?" My only intention is that they live without fear of me, that they may trust me and that I may give them happiness, not sorrow" (Kalinga RE 2). What a change from Kautalya's administrative philosophy that

taught respect was built by utilizing punishment or a show of force. Ashoka applied the philosophy of goodness to all, even with previous enemies.

Ashoka had concern for future generations: "I have this edict written so my sons and great grandsons may not consider making new conquests…that they be done with forbearance and light punishment, or still better, that they consider making conquest by *dharma* only. (RE 13) Ashoka hoped that his descendants would act as he did and do the right thing, for "truly it is easy to do evil" (RE 5). He understood human nature knowing that it was tempting to lash out at enemies. In thinking about the future of India, Ashoka expressed a hope that goodness would prevail.

Ashoka was even concerned with the comfort of travelers passing through India; he saw the state as an institution of universal benevolence. He had wells dug at intervals along the highways, and he set up watering places for people and their animals. He planted shade Banyan trees and mango groves to provide shade. Raised seats were built for weary travelers on the road. Ashoka explains: "I have done these things for this purpose, that people might practice the *dharma*" (PE 7). The comforts for travelers can be viewed as not only charitable, but also profitable for the economy in India by encouraging trade to pass through a welcoming country.

Ashoka was also concerned with the comfort of animals. He constructed public hospitals for animals as well as for humans. Medicinal herbs and plants were imported for both animals and humans:

> [I, Ashoka] made provisions for two types of medicinal treatment: medical treatment for humans and animals. Wherever medicinal herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have imported or grown. (RE 2)

Time and time again the Buddha declared that a good Buddhist must not destroy life but practice non-violence towards all living things (Gokhale 69). The doctrine of respect for all forms of life was reflected as Ashoka built hospitals and obtaining medicines.

Ashoka's acceptance of Buddhist beliefs changed his perspective on several accepted traditions. Some of the yearly festivals, particularly the spring fertility celebrations, were an item of contention for Ashoka due to public drunkenness and the use of generous supplies of meat. These events offended the morality of this now pious leader. He explained: "Nor should festivals be held for [Ashoka] sees much to object in such festivals" (RE 1). RE 9 described the "vulgar and worthless ceremonies" that women performed that "bear little fruit." As much as Ashoka was respected for his convictions and his desire for his dynasty to reflect Buddhist standards, one can imagine that many of the people of India considered their leader a stick in the mud.

Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism was reflected in works of art produced during his reign. J. Vogel, in his book, Buddhist Art in India, explained "the history of Buddhist art does not really commence until the reign of the great Ashoka about 250 BC, two centuries and a half centuries after

Buddha's nirvana" (10). Mahavamsa, a text containing Buddhist legends preserved in Sri Lanka, credited Ashoka with building eighty-four thousand monasteries and stupas (commemorative markers with relics of the Buddha). The numbers were a gross exaggeration, but there was a core of truth. Ashoka himself claimed that he set up pillars in the Buddhist holy sites. Inscriptions stated: "[I, Ashoka] had a stone figure and pillar set up because the Lord was born here" (PE 1). The earliest excavated cave dwellings and shrines in India belonged to the age of Ashoka. One cave hollowed out during his reign consisted of two apartments: an outer rectangular one, and an inner circular one with a dome. This rock architecture required precision and artistry with the interior walls polished like glass (a Persian technique). The cave temples indicated the abilities of the Ashokan artists, and the state's interest in art (Vogel 10).

Another great artistic achievement was the stone pillar. Each pillar, placed near populated areas for all to read, stood forty feet high. The ancient custom of setting up pillars as monuments, lampposts, or flagpoles was not unique to Ashoka. Gokhale explained the significance of the pillars:

> The vision that conceived them was imperial in intentions, the art hat conceived them undoubtedly received its inspiration from outside the national and cultural frontiers of the country...the polish reflects the elegance of the Mauryan court, their loftiness is an

> index of the high soaring ambition of the dynasty and their capitals proclaim the piety of Ashoka. (142)

Ven Dhammika, in his work, The Edicts of King Ashoka, explained, "these pillars are testimony to the technological and artistic genius of ancient Indian civilization" (3). Often the pillars were capped with a lion. The symbolism of the lion on the pillars started with Ashoka, and has carried on to represent India today. The lion's roar silences all other animals. Sri Lanka tales compared the teachings of Buddha to the roar of a lion. The metaphor continues as Buddha was compared to a lone lion that was vigilant and industrious (Gokhale 143). The lion therefore symbolizes and was associated with both the Buddha and the Mauryan Dynasty.

Ashoka played a major role in the propagation of Buddhism outside of India, also. Under Ashoka, Buddhist monks were sent out in every direction: Burma, Tibet, Nepal, Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Israel. The western missions were not as successful as the ones in the east where Buddhism was fervently embraced in China. Ananda Guruge in "Emperor Ashoka and Buddhism: Unresolved Discrepancies between Buddhist Tradition and Asokan Inscriptions" explained Ashoka's role in the spread of Buddhism:

> The major contribution came in the form of exploratory missions to prepare the receptivity of host countries for missions of monks...he continued to support the missionary activities in host countries,

> exposing them in the process to technical and aesthetic achievements of the Mauryan Civilization. (82)

Ashoka's children from his first wife, Devi, were also involved in the spread of Buddhism. His son, Mahinda, and his daughter, Sangamitta, went to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) about 240 BCE. Buddhist legends, from Sri Lankan texts, explained that the Sri Lankan king welcomed them, and then he was converted. One of the gifts Ashoka's children brought with them was a branch of the bohdi tree, which successfully transplanted. A descendant of this "Tree of Enlightenment" can be seen even today (Strong 153).

What became of the Mauryan Dynasty after the unique rule of Ashoka? His successors ruled over a period of less than fifty years with the end of the Mauryan Dynasty about 186 BCE. Many factors contributed to the fall. First of all, Ashoka's reign created a large financial burden. He maintained a massive bureaucracy with the employment of numerous inspectors, agents, and his infamous *dharma mahamatras*. Then add to this cost, the expense of the religious monuments and pillars erected by Ashoka.

Another factor that contributed to the fall of the dynasty was social discontent (Gokhale 148). The large amount of prohibitory and regulatory orders placed on the people, although inspired by ethical motives, encroached on their private lives and social gatherings. Ashoka abolished various festivals that had been traditions for many years. The Brahmins were certainly a powerful group that harbored resentment over Ashoka's promotion of Buddhism, which taught

that priest were not needed to achieve spirituality. Another factor in the downfall was an increase in foreign invasions in the second century BCE. Looking over the four great empire of India history (Mauryan, Gupta, Mughal and British), the Mauryan Dynasty lasted one hundred and thirty-seven years, approximately the same life-span as the others; par for the course. These many factors contributed to the end of the Mauryan Dynasty.

To what extent was Ashoka personally responsible for the end of the empire aggressively started by his grandfather, Chandragupta? Did his "experiment in righteousness…disturb a delicate equilibrium of social forces, an equilibrium that was the basis of the imperial structure?" (Gokhale 148). Kautalya, who designed the structure of the Mauryan Dynasty, felt strongly that *dharma* needed to be in balance with *danda*, a show of force. Ashoka blatantly dissolved violence in any form and replaced it with goodness to all. Possibly the Indian people were just not able to continue with Ashoka's standards of goodness after living in a punitive world for so long.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Ashoka Maurya changed the history of India. He took a ride no one has since duplicated. He shook the foundation of the Mauryan Dynasty. His grandfather, Chandragupta, and father, Bindusara, aggressively expanded the empire. In contrast, Ashoka told his neighbors not to fear for there would be no more conquests (Kalinga RE 2). He was a man who publicly apologized for harm he had caused. Rock and pillar edicts, the neon signs of the third century BCE, professed his own evil doings, and his sincere apologies (RE 13). How seldom this was seen in history. As a convert to pacifism, he rejected any show of force, and replaced it with goodness to all (RE 4). Life within the palace walls changed: no more hunting, no more vulgar festivals, and no more killing of animals (RE 1). Ashoka claimed that his people were his children (Kalinga RE 1). He lived accordingly as he made sure charity was distributed evenly, hospitals were built for all, and healing medicines were imported for his "children" (RE 2). He opened the doors of India for travelers overwhelming them with goodness as he planted shade trees, and dug wells for cool water on their journey (PE 7). Ashoka felt strongly that every religious sect should be able to worship as they pleased; he appointed morality officers to watch over this freedom (RE 5). This monarch was the catalyst for Buddhism growing into a major religion as he

sent out missionaries and built monasteries and pillars proclaiming the teachings of the Buddha (PE 1-7).

As stated in the Introduction, there were three prime functions of knowledge in the field of humanities (Lewis 9). First of all, the human condition should be improved. Ashoka was an inspiration as a leader who looked out for the well being of his people with actions to back up his words:"I desire for all men…their welfare and happiness in this world and the next" (Kalinga RE 1). Next, Lewis stated there needs to be a pacification of the environment. Ashoka Maurya was the "prophet of pacifism" (Strong 173) as he renounced every violent behavior: "the sound of the drum has been replaced by the sound of the *dharma*" (RE 4). The last function of knowledge in the humanities was to see the liberation of the human potential. Ashoka arose as the most powerful man on the Indian subcontinent; he could have lorded over his people. Ashoka Maurya took the high road as a moralist in action and revolutionized the history of India.

Ashoka's life was an example and an encouragement that change was possible no matter how dark the days. Howard Zinn expressed the importance of looking back in history at people who have made a change: "We need to remind ourselves of the depth of humanistic, revolutionary impulse…the reach across the centuries conveys the depth" (48). A look back into the third century BCE at Ashoka Maurya conveyed the depth of a man with a desire to change: first himself and then to improve the human condition for the people of a whole country, India. There is hope.

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